

The 2003 Relaunch of *Vancouver Magazine*

by

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ABSTRACT

This project report examines the 2003 relaunch of *Vancouver* magazine. It provides an overview of the magazine's 35-year history, as well as an analysis of its current state: editorial, advertising, circulation, readership and competition. The report also offers an inside account of the strategic planning that went into the relaunch, including: findings from a July 2002 competitive analysis of *Toronto Life*, Canada's preeminent city magazine; highlights from a November 2002 *Vancouver* magazine subscriber survey; and a chronicle of various planning meetings, held within Transcontinental Media West, between July and December 2002.

This report evaluates *Vancouver* magazine's prospects for a successful relaunch within the framework of the two city magazine studies, each of which addresses the role and purpose of a city magazine. Questions and findings from those studies are then posed to three editors of *Vancouver* magazine (past and present), who offer an analysis of the city magazine research within the context of their specific experiences at the magazine.

This project report serves as a case study of the magazine relaunch process, but it does not attempt to evaluate the success of this particular relaunch. It offers general lessons and observations for those interested in launching or relaunching a city magazine, and specific lessons and observations for those interested in the future of *Vancouver* magazine.

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Part One: Background to the Relaunch

1. Introduction

Vancouver magazine, the city magazine of record in Vancouver, has existed in some form since 1967. Over the past 35 years, it has gone through a number of publishers, editors and editorial mandates. In April of 2003, the current publisher, Transcontinental Media, is scheduled to go to market with yet another incarnation of *Vancouver* magazine. There are various reasons for this most recent relaunch, but the key ones are as follows: there is a perception (amongst staff members and readers) that the magazine has lost its focus in recent years and has lost touch with its core audience; there has been a marked decline in advertising revenue at the magazine over the past four years; and there are competitive threats, both existing and potential, that jeopardize *Vancouver* magazine's position as the authoritative city magazine.

Part One of this report attempts to define what a city magazine is. It offers a brief history of how city magazines came into being and examines the diverse origins of some of North America's leading city magazines. This section also examines the history of *Vancouver* magazine and provides an analysis of the magazine's current state: its editorial structure, advertising, circulation, readership and competition. Finally, in Part One, there is some discussion as to why magazines relaunch themselves, with specific reasons for *Vancouver* magazine's 2003 relaunch.

Part Two of the report explores the nature and role of city magazines from the perspective of three *Vancouver* editors, past and present: the current editor (2002 - present), Matthew Mallon; former *Vancouver* editor (1993-1999), and current Transcontinental West editorial director, Jim Sutherland; and former *Vancouver* editor (1975-1987, and 1990), and current *Vancouver* columnist, Malcolm Parry. The section begins with an introduction to two published articles on the topic of city magazines: one

from Professor Ernest Hynds at the University of Georgia, and one from the editors of the industry publication, *Folio*. Select questions raised in the Hynds study, and key observations from the editors and publishers quoted in the *Folio* article, are then presented to the *Vancouver* editors for their comments, providing an evaluative framework for the ensuing discussion on city magazines.

The focus of Part Three of this report is on the planning and preparation stage of the *Vancouver* magazine relaunch. This section begins with a study that this author completed (for Transcontinental Media, in July of 2002) of *Toronto Life*, Canada's largest (and, perhaps, most successful) city magazine, comparing *Toronto Life* with *Vancouver* magazine in terms of editorial, advertising, circulation and other key measures. Following the *Toronto Life* study, the report chronicles a number of strategic planning sessions that were conducted in the summer and fall of 2002 in preparation for the April 2003 relaunch. Finally, Part Three of the report outlines the proposed signature elements for the new magazine, and briefly touches on the market research that was conducted to support the relaunch's sales and marketing activities.

As this report will go to print around the same time as the scheduled relaunch, it cannot provide an effective evaluation of the outcome of the relaunch efforts. The report can only serve as a case study of the relaunch process: providing context for the magazine that is being relaunched; offering reasons as to why a relaunch was deemed necessary; exploring the best practices of other city magazines; and outlining the research and planning that went into establishing a new editorial platform. *Vancouver* magazine has been around for almost four decades and as Vancouver has changed, so too has the magazine, with varying degrees of success. In the months that follow the April 2003 relaunch, it will become apparent how successful *Vancouver* magazine has been at capturing the spirit of present-day Vancouver and regaining the trust of both readers and advertisers.

2. History of City Magazines

First, the question: what is a city magazine? A wide variety of magazines serve the needs of urban dwellers, including tourist-oriented guides (such as *What's Happening*, *Where Vancouver*), general-interest magazines (such as the *New Yorker*), fashion-oriented urban magazines (such as Montreal's *Ocean Drive*) and alternative "magazine" newspapers (such as *The Village Voice*, *The Georgia Straight* and *NOW*). While each represents a sort of urban periodical, competing with each other for local advertising, none of the above publications fully fit the profile of a city magazine; the problem, however, is that there is no established definition of what a city magazine is. For the purposes of this report, though, here are three defining characteristics:

- **A primary, over-arching focus on the city it comes from** (most of the *New Yorker's* content, for instance, is not New York-specific and is geared to a broad, international audience)
- **A blend of service journalism and feature writing** (city guides, such as the *Where* publications, do not devote any space to feature writing, for instance)
- **A format of enduring quality** (city magazines, unlike city weeklies such as the *Georgia Straight*, are built to last and to be referred to by readers on multiple occasions. They have appeal beyond the issue date.)

The modern city-magazine movement took hold in the 1960s. City magazines were introduced as consumer publications that could, in the words of one scholar, "fuse the identity and consumption habits of their readers with the branded 'lifestyle' of a given metropolitan region"¹. The city magazine was largely an advertiser-orchestrated creation, driven by the need of local businesses to differentiate themselves from competitors in an increasingly global economic environment; a publication that could appeal to both locals and visitors offered the perfect vehicle for such differentiation. The city magazine built

¹ Miriam Greenberg, *Urban Affairs Review*, November 2000, p. 231

upon the successes of urban guidebooks, reviews and press coverage — media which had served the needs of local advertising agencies and publishers for the previous 150 years² — and allowed local businesses to engage in the development of niche marketing and to target specific urban consumers. Many city magazines, such as *Atlanta* magazine, started as publications of the local chamber of commerce but relatively few remain so today: 89 percent of city magazines in the United States are now privately owned, while only five percent are operated by the local chamber of commerce³. (There is no major city magazine in Canada that is owned by a chamber of commerce). Other magazines, like *San Diego* magazine, were started to provide an alternative voice in a one-newspaper community; yet others, like *New York* (and *Toronto Life* and *Vancouver*, to a certain extent) were designed to offer an urban survival guide for upper-middle-class city dwellers⁴. In the years that followed World War II, as North America underwent a period of rapid growth in urban and suburban areas (by 1960, fully 70 percent of the U.S. population was considered urban⁵), city magazines flourished. By the mid-1960s, approximately 60 metropolitan regions across the country had established magazines bearing their names; over 100 such publications exist today⁶.

The publication that is thought to be the first city magazine in North America, *San Diego* magazine, preceded the city-magazine movement of the 1960s: it was established in 1948⁷. Other notable American entries into the marketplace included *Los Angeles* magazine and *Atlanta* magazine (both founded in 1961), *Boston* magazine (founded in 1962), *New York* magazine (founded in 1968, and the oldest weekly city magazine) and *Texas Monthly* (founded in 1973, and one of the most decorated city magazines, with eight National Magazine awards and 38 nominations in its 28-year history). The city

² Miriam Greenberg, *Urban Affairs Review*, November 2000, p. 229

³ Ernest C. Hynds, *Mass Comm Review*, January 1995, p. 93

⁴ Ernest C. Hynds, *Mass Comm Review*, January 1995. p. 91

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Miriam Greenberg, *Urban Affairs Review*, November 2000, p. 228

⁷ Ibid

magazine concept came to Canada with *Toronto Life*, started in 1966 by Michael de Pencier, and was followed shortly thereafter by *Vancouver* magazine, started in 1967.

3. History of *Vancouver* Magazine

Vancouver magazine did not begin as *Vancouver*: in 1967, the magazine started its life as an advertiser-driven tourist publication called *Dick MacLean's Greater Vancouver Greeter Guide*. By 1974, the publication had broadened its focus somewhat, as the re-titled city magazine, *Vancouver Leisure*⁸; a year later, after a brief interruption in its publication, *Vancouver Leisure* was brought under the ownership of local lawyer and businessman Ron Stern and renamed *Vancouver* magazine. Under the new management, and with a new editorial team in place (led by editorial director Paul Grescoe and editor Malcolm Parry), *Vancouver* evolved into a *New York* magazine of the northwest: a brash, civic-minded, politically oriented publication, and one that exemplified the New Journalism described in Tom Wolfe's famous *New York* article of February 1972⁹. Typical of mid-1970s *Vancouver* magazine was the August 1975 cover story, The Road to Reno. The 10,000-word story followed the adventures of a busload of Vancouverites traveling to the Nevada gambling mecca: as the editor's story description explained, "we ride along with a band of funsters, tasting the warm rye, singing the songs and hearing the midnight wails of those the machines betray"¹⁰.

By the early 1980s, *Vancouver* magazine had begun to incorporate more service journalism into the editorial mix: more information on food and restaurants, travel and, particularly, fashion (in fact, the September 1981 issue had to include a 102-page

⁸ *Vancouver* magazine, 30th Anniversary Special Issue, November 1997, p. 59

⁹ "The Birth of 'The New Journalism'" described a non-fiction form that borrowed narrative tools, once the domain of literature, for usage in reported pieces. The form had been around for some time — Wolfe's 1965 book *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* is an example — but the name was coined by Wolfe in the February 1972 article in *New York*

¹⁰ *Vancouver* magazine, August 1975, p. 3

supplement, called *Vancouver Fashion*, to accommodate all the fashion advertisers who wanted into *Vancouver*). Still under the editorship of Malcolm Parry, the magazine was changing with the times; as the glitzy, glamorous and celebrity-driven culture of the 1980s rolled into Vancouver, so too did it materialize in the pages of *Vancouver* magazine. The April 1986 cover story on Princess Diana, written by society columnist Valerie Gibson, is typical of that era: “The woman who single-handedly swept the Royal Family up the popularity polls will be here next month with husband Prince Charles to cut the ribbon on Expo and tour the province. We look at who she is, what she likes, how she lives and what made her that way”¹¹.

Changes in ownership also came in the 1980s: in 1983, Stern sold *Vancouver* magazine to Comac Communications of Toronto for a reported \$2.8 million¹², and then five year later, Comac sold *Vancouver* magazine (along with *Western Living*, *Calgary* and *Edmonton* magazines) to Telemedia Publishing of Montreal for a reported \$10 million¹³. The first five years under the new owners were turbulent ones: *Vancouver* magazine went through five editors between 1988 and 1993, and there was speculation that the magazine might even fold¹⁴. By late 1993, however, a new editor, Jim Sutherland, had taken over at *Vancouver* magazine and the magazine started to regain focus and direction. In the wake of Expo '86, Vancouver had started to take on a more cosmopolitan tenor, and the magazine began to reflect this, with regular columns on the local film, music and theatre communities (“Brollywood”, “Music” and “Curtain”, respectively). As well, the 90s marked a decided emphasis on service journalism: in addition to regular columns on shopping and restaurants, special issues were developed during this period to support these categories. (The Annual Restaurant Awards and Where The Buys Are continue, with great success, to this day).

¹¹ *Vancouver* magazine, April 1986, p. 5

¹² Western Magazine Awards 2002 program, p. 4 (timeline)

¹³ *Marketing* magazine, July 4, 1998, p.8

¹⁴ www.masthead.ca, December 1999 news archives. Accessed on December 1, 2000

By the end of the 1990s, the magazine had lost its way again. The city of Vancouver was in economic decline, yet instead of playing the part of urban survival guide, *Vancouver* magazine became a confusing hodgepodge of content: puff pieces on local teenage models and Las Vegas travelogues (March 2000) mixed with edgy features on restaurant food chains and Yaletown rent boys (October 2000). Jim Sutherland had left *Vancouver* magazine by the end of 1999, and for the two years that followed, the magazine drifted; by March of 2000, *Vancouver* had a new publisher (Transcontinental Media, out of Montreal) and by early 2002, a new editor was appointed, Matthew Mallon, who would introduce small changes to the editorial design and mix. Yet a full editorial shakeup would have to wait until April 2003, with the anticipated launch of a new *Vancouver* magazine.

4. The Mission of *Vancouver* Magazine

The mission statement for *Vancouver* magazine, as of the fall of 2002 (pre-relaunch), was as follows¹⁵:

Vancouver magazine aims to help readers get the most out of life in one of North America's most exciting and dynamic cities. Our smart editorial mix offers authoritative coverage of dining, shopping, fashion, real estate, local personalities and other vital matters of urban culture. Aspiring to the highest standards of writing, reporting and design, we also deliver unique insights into civic events and issues that affect Vancouverites' daily lives. *Vancouver* magazine strikes the right balance between service, news and entertainment – the key to building a loyal community of readers.

Such a statement is found almost exclusively in company marketing materials (such as the magazine's advertising rate card), with its aim being to assure advertisers that the magazine has a sense of purpose and direction. Advertisers, however, are not convinced. Between 1998 and 2002, advertising revenues for *Vancouver* magazine fell almost 14

¹⁵ *Vancouver* magazine 2002 Media Kit, p. 2

percent, with a steep decline in national advertising (-36.7 percent)¹⁶; page counts for the magazine, which regularly breached the 200-page level in the 1980s, averaged only 76 pages in 2001. By early 2002, it was clear that something had to be done to reverse the fortunes of *Vancouver* magazine.

5. *Vancouver* Magazine: A Situational Analysis

To better understand the remedial efforts being contemplated for the relaunch, it is necessary to first examine *Vancouver* magazine's current situation. What follows is a profile of its editorial structure, an examination of its advertising base, and detailed information on the magazine's circulation, readership and competition.

Editorial

The editorial team at *Vancouver* magazine is a small one: one editor, one associate editor and one editorial assistant. (There are usually one or two editorial interns as well.)

Working with the editorial staff is an art department of two (art director and assistant art director). While much of the magazine's "front-of-the-book" section is written in-house, *Vancouver* magazine relies heavily on freelance writers, artists and photographers to fill its pages each month. There are regular columns in *Vancouver* (such as Diner, by Jamie Maw), but for the most part, it is not a highly structured magazine. Here is an outline of the current editorial structure, as of late 2002:

- Front of Book. In the front of the magazine, there is a section called Vancouver Special. In the Vancouver Special package, there is: an editor's

¹⁶ Transcontinental Media, internal company document

note (unlabelled), Malcolm Parry's Vancouver Life society photos, the Editor's Choice event listings and 4-6 short pieces (charts, stories, profiles). Letters to the Editor precede Vancouver Special when there are any.

- The Well. In the middle section of the magazine, there are one or two short features (Sports, Homes, Politics, etc), as well as one or two longer features (usually including the cover story). The well takes on a different look when a special issue is produced, such as the annual summer issue, Where The Buys Are; in such an instance, service journalism replaces most (if not all) of the feature writing.
- Back of the Book. With the exception of the Diner column and a back-page humour column called Good News, very little consistently appears in this section of the magazine. Often, the travel writing is in the back of the book, as are the wine reviews and the shopping (The Goods) column.

Vancouver magazine also relies on anchor issues to sell advertising and to increase newsstand sales; most of these anchor issues are service-oriented. Below is a list of the anchor issues and their cover ("sell") lines for 2002:

- January/February: The Best of Vancouver ("The coolest shops, services, people, secrets, bargains and places to eat")
- April: The 13th Annual Restaurant Awards ("30 critics cast their votes: Your authoritative guide to the city's best dining")
- May: Best Getaways ("10 fishing lodges; B.C. by train; top golf courses")
- June: The Secrets of Beauty ("The city's guide to looking good")

- July/August: Where the Buys Are (“Our annual shopping guide. 61 must-haves: housewares, gadgets, beauty, fashion, kids”)
- October: The Luxe Life (“Premium Real Estate and Shopping; 15 Ways to Get Money Quick; and Who’s Rich Now?”)
- December: Power List (“This City’s Biggest Players, Movers and Shakers”)

Though the overall editorial focus of *Vancouver* magazine has weakened over the past few years, the individual accomplishments of the magazine’s writers and photographers continue to be recognized. At the 20th Annual Western Magazine Awards in June of 2002, *Vancouver* magazine picked up thirteen nominations and won four awards: best public issues article (Justin Beddall: “Have You Seen These Women?”), best service article (Jamie Maw and Tim Pawsey: “12th Annual Restaurant Awards”), best architectural/landscape/still life photography (Clinton Hussey: “Living in the Garden of Eating”) and best illustration (Ryan Heshka: “El Adbustero”)¹⁷. At the National Magazine Awards in May of 2002, *Vancouver* won a silver award for food photography (“12th Annual Restaurant Awards”), as well as two honourable mentions, for service writing and column writing (the Restaurant Awards issue and Jamie Maw’s Diner column, respectively)¹⁸.

Advertising

Advertising in *Vancouver* magazine is divided between national and retail accounts. National advertisers, largely based in Toronto, are handled by Transcontinental’s Toronto sales office; retail advertisers, almost exclusively based in Vancouver, are handled by

¹⁷ Western Magazine Awards Foundation

¹⁸ National Magazine Awards Foundation press release, May 31, 2002

Vancouver magazine's four local sales representatives. National advertising is much sought after by the magazine, as the cost of sales tends to be lower and the payoff greater: such advertisers tend to buy full-page ads, often as part of a multiple-issue campaign, thus giving the salesperson in one sales call, with one account, what might otherwise require ten sales calls on four retail accounts. The difficult reality, however, is that national advertisers don't need to advertise in a city magazine; they have plenty of other ways of reaching upscale, high-income individuals (other magazines, newspapers and specialty television). When the advertising market is tight, or when advertising priorities change, city magazines are among the first media to be dropped from a national advertiser's campaign. The top five national advertising categories for *Vancouver* magazine are automotive, watches, wine/beer/liquor, fashion and cosmetics. Combined, they represent 3/5 of all national advertising in the magazine in any given year¹⁹.

Unlike national advertisers, local advertisers do, in large measure, rely on city magazines to reach an upscale, high-income audience. And so — through good times and bad — retail advertising remains the backbone of city magazines, typically accounting for more than half of all advertising revenue (and as much as 98 percent of revenue, in some smaller markets)²⁰; *Vancouver* magazine is no different, with retail advertising representing between 55 and 62 percent of total ad revenue²¹. Even as total advertising revenues declined for *Vancouver* magazine between 1998 and 2002, retail advertising rose during the same period by more than 11 percent²². Because of *Vancouver*'s widely recognized strength in restaurant coverage, the magazine receives a significant share of restaurant advertising: it is the magazine's number one advertising category, accounting for more than 30 percent of all retail advertising, and almost 20 percent of total

¹⁹ Transcontinental Media, internal company document

²⁰ *Folio* magazine, December 1, 2000. p. 24

²¹ Transcontinental Media, internal company document

²² *Ibid*

advertising revenue²³. In addition to restaurants, the top five retail advertising categories are medical, fashion, jewelry and wine/beer/liquor; combined, these categories represent 3/5 of all retail advertising in the magazine in a given year²⁴.

As will be discussed in the next section, *Vancouver* magazine is a controlled-circulation magazine: Transcontinental delivers free copies to selected high-income postal codes, and thereby decides whom they want to read the magazine. There are few paying subscribers — around 800 — and they represent less than one percent of all revenues. Around 3,000 people purchase copies off of the newsstands each month; they represent less than five percent of all revenues. Because circulation revenue is so low, advertising revenue becomes that much more important: whereas a typical city magazine can count on 75 percent of revenues coming from advertising and 25 percent from circulation²⁵, *Vancouver* magazine relies on advertising for almost 95 percent of its revenues²⁶. And because advertising revenue is so important, advertisers have a good deal of indirect influence on the look and feel of *Vancouver* magazine: service features (editorial space devoted to restaurants and shopping) predominate, advertising supplements (advertising features, made to look like editorial content) are plentiful, and covers tend to shy away from anything dark or controversial.

Circulation

The circulation strategy for *Vancouver* magazine is directed from Transcontinental's Toronto office, where the magazine's circulation manager resides; the company also has a newsstand manager in Vancouver who handles all of its western newsstand sales.

Vancouver magazine is published ten times a year, with the slower advertising months of

²³ Transcontinental Media, internal company document

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ *Folio* magazine, December 1, 2000. p. 24

²⁶ Transcontinental Media, internal company document

January/February and July/August combined into joint issues. Controlled circulation accounts for about 94% of *Vancouver*'s monthly circulation; for the six months ended in March of 2002, this represented an average of 51,762 copies out of a total circulation of 55,166²⁷. These non-paid copies are distributed by private carriers, without name and address labels, to upscale Vancouver neighbourhoods — Shaughnessy, Oakridge, Kerrisdale, Point Grey, False Creek and Kitsilano — as well as to the tony suburbs of North and West Vancouver. In all, these areas accounted for 44,878 controlled copies in March of 2002. Other means of controlled distribution include bulk copies sent to reception rooms (200 copies, via Canada Post), Vancouver-area condominiums (2,404), Vancouver-area hotels (4,280) and West Coast Air (100). Controlled-circulation levels tend to remain constant over time, with minor periodic adjustments made to the particular households being targeted.

The paid circulation is bulk, single-copy or subscription. Bulk represents a negligible amount (15 or 20 copies per issue), while subscriptions fluctuate between 800 and 1,000 per year. The volatility, and a regular circulation-department topic, is on newsstands. Single-copy sales vary from month to month, and while newsstand sales are not an exact science, much credit or blame for a particular month's performance rests with its cover. Sometimes, a cover topic will sell itself: the Annual Restaurant Awards issue, published in April, sells up to twice as many newsstand copies as does the average issue (7,268 copies in April 2002; the average 2001 issue sold 3,707 copies²⁸). Otherwise, a particular issue's newsstand success rests with a confluence of factors: good cover art, captivating sell lines, intriguing stories, topicality and good fortune.

Vancouver magazine had such a success with the December 2001 issue. It featured a stylized, bleed-off-the-edge photograph of Carole Taylor (former city politician, new chair of the CBC), combined with the sell line "The Power List: 75

²⁷ *Vancouver* magazine CCAB circulation statement, Period Ended March 2002

²⁸ Transcontinental Media, internal company document

People Who Call The Shots, Shape Our Lives & Rule This City”, written dramatically in black and red type. In addition to being an attractive, captivating cover, it seemed to capture the zeitgeist of Vancouver in 2001: with dramatic changes in both the role of government and the nature of the economy in Vancouver, there likely was an appetite amongst Vancouverites to know who was “calling the shots” and who was “shaping their lives”. This, in addition to a certain amount of luck, enabled the December 2001 issue to sell 4,923 copies, compared to sales of between 2,400 and 3,000 in the two previous December issues²⁹; the issue was also nominated for *Masthead* magazine’s Newsstand Cover of the Year (for magazines with circulations of between 50,000 and 149,999)³⁰.

The unpredictability of newsstand sales means that publishers have to place more copies on newsstands than they intend to sell; the draw, as it is called, is about 10,000 copies per issue for *Vancouver* magazine. The average sell-through rate for Canadian magazines is between 35 and 38 percent, according to the Canadian Magazine Publishers Association; in 2001, *Vancouver* magazine’s sell-through rate was 37.6 percent (98,690 copies were put on newsstands, 37,072 were sold, and 61,618 were pulped³¹). With a successful issue, the sell-through rate can rise dramatically: the December 2001 Power List issue sold 55 percent of its draw, while the April 2001 Restaurant Awards issue sold 67 percent of its draw³². Newsstand draws are adjusted, depending on the anticipated demand for a particular issue (the Restaurant Awards issue has a draw that is 50 percent higher than average), but draws remain high for one key reason: publishers need newsstand presence. A magazine’s most important revenue source is advertising, advertising is based on readership, and readership is based on the number of circulated copies; many people will flip through a magazine on newsstands, without ever buying a copy, and subsequently be counted as a reader in the Print Measurement Bureau surveys.

²⁹ Transcontinental Media, internal company document

³⁰ [www.masthead.ca /NMAF.htm](http://www.masthead.ca/NMAF.htm). Accessed on October 8, 2002

³¹ Transcontinental Media, internal company document

³² Ibid

Readership

Largely thanks to its various public placements, *Vancouver* magazine can claim to have 302,000 readers³³, or about 5.5 readers for every circulated copy. Since copies sent to individual households would have a somewhat limited secondary readership, those issues placed in more public settings — newsstands, hotels, West Coast Air — account for the high readers-per-copy figure. (*Vancouver* magazine has the second highest number of readers-per-copy for a controlled-circulation magazine, after *National Post Business* magazine). *Vancouver* magazine has a fairly even split of male and female readers (54 percent and 46 percent, respectively), the average reader is 41 years old and, as might be expected (given its targeted circulation strategy), the magazine's readership is affluent: their average household income is \$61,783³⁴.

Advertisers — and particularly, advertising agencies — are the primary audience for the annual Print Measurement Bureau (PMB) readership reports. These advertisers identify a particular demographic segment that they are interested in reaching — Senior Managers/Owners of Businesses/Professionals (MOPEs) is one desirable category — and evaluate a variety of magazines based on the composition of that segment in their respective readerships. The population base against which the magazines are measured is given an “Index” number, set at 100, and a magazine's particular “Index” falls above or below 100, depending on how it compares to that base. For example, *Vancouver* magazine counts 82,000 readers as being MOPEs, or 27.2 percent of its total readership; English Canada (the population base) counts 16.7 percent of its population as being MOPEs. If 16.7 percent represents an Index of 100, then *Vancouver* has an Index of 163 in its MOPEs readership. This is considered to be a strong composition by most advertisers.

³³ Print Measurement Bureau, 2002 Readership Study

³⁴ PMB 2002

The problem is that over the past two years, *Vancouver* magazine's readership has decreased, from 323,000 in the 2001 PMB survey to 302,000 in the 2002 survey (a decline of seven percent); while *Vancouver* magazine's circulation has remained constant during this time, the number of readers per copy has been falling. There are two conclusions that might be drawn from this: that the magazine is not getting enough public exposure; and that the magazine is not capturing people's interest. The latter issue is central to the question of *Vancouver* magazine's relaunch; the former issue is a question of circulation marketing. Nowadays, it is relatively easy to qualify as a reader of a magazine: PMB's "recent reading" method only requires that a person has "looked into" an issue of *Vancouver* magazine to count as a reader. As such, publishers are pushing more copies of their magazines into the public domain so that more readers can "look into" an issue, thus increasing readers-per-copy.

Transcontinental is no different. It is employing a "rotational distribution strategy", whereby the exact households receiving *Vancouver* magazine, in each of its chosen neighbourhoods (Shaughnessy, West Vancouver, etc), will change periodically. Each household, after a certain number of months of having received free copies, will be asked to purchase a cut-rate subscription (\$9.95 - 70 percent off the newsstand price) or risk having their delivery discontinued; at the same time, a new household down the road will begin to receive complimentary copies of *Vancouver* magazine. Even if the conversion rate to paid subscriptions is low, more copies into more households increases the probability that overall readership will rise.

Competition

Some part of *Vancouver* magazine's decline in readership, as well as its slide in advertising, might be attributable to a competing product: *Vancouver Lifestyles*. First published in 1994, the magazine started as a West Vancouver publication but has since

expanded its reach to upscale homes in Shaughnessy and Kerrisdale: the same neighbourhoods that *Vancouver* magazine targets. Its circulation base is less than *Vancouver* magazine's (30,000 vs. 65,000), but more significantly, its circulation is not being audited. This represents a major stumbling block for advertisers, who require an impartial third-party opinion on circulation numbers to determine who is actually receiving the magazine; furthermore, *Vancouver Lifestyles* is not measured by PMB, so little is publicly known about who actually reads the magazine.

Vancouver Lifestyles' solution to these challenges is to charge low advertising rates: according to their rate card, they charge less than half of *Vancouver* magazine's rates (\$3,200 vs. \$7,170, for a full-colour page³⁵), but often, with discounting, the differential is even greater. In spite of being unaudited and unmeasured, *Vancouver Lifestyles* has managed to secure a significant share of the retail advertising market; in particular, *Lifestyles* carries a large share of real-estate advertising (it accounted for 12 pages of advertising in their 64-page August 2002 issue). From a content perspective, *Vancouver Lifestyles* has not presented as much competition for *Vancouver* magazine. *Lifestyles* has a much softer focus — on “local personalities, real estate and the celebration of wealth and success,” according to *Masthead* magazine³⁶ — and has largely avoided the labour-intensive feature writing and service journalism of *Vancouver* magazine. Which editorial approach readers prefer is hard to say, as *Lifestyles* does not have readership data to analyze. But with the September 2002 announcement that *Lifestyles* has hired a new editor — whose explicit aim is to introduce “more substantive editorial”³⁷ and create a more “hard-hitting” magazine — it is fair to say that someone (the publisher, advertisers) felt that the magazine needed to change.

The other competition for *Vancouver* magazine is indirect: daily and weekly newspapers. In particular, the weeklies — *Georgia Straight*, *Westender* and *Vancouver*

³⁵ 2002 Rate Cards: *Vancouver Lifestyles* and *Vancouver* magazine

³⁶ *Masthead*, September 2002, p. 15

³⁷ *Masthead*, September 2002, p. 16

Courier — attempt a similar mixture of features and service journalism; they have, however, a markedly heavier focus on current news and events. As a monthly, *Vancouver* magazine cannot be “timely” in the stories it covers, so it focuses on in-depth analyses, reviews and profiles. Still, the weeklies pose some threat in terms of retail advertising: the top weekly — the *Georgia Straight*, with 360,000 readers — attracts a broad selection of advertisers, including a large number of the fashion, medical and restaurant advertisers who are found in *Vancouver* magazine. There is relatively little overlap in the two publications’ targeted audiences — the *Straight* is distributed (largely dropped) in downtown, high-traffic locations, while *Vancouver* magazine is delivered directly to homeowners outside the downtown — but the money which local advertisers have available to spend is a finite amount, split amongst an ever-increasing array of local media.

6. Why Magazines Relaunch

With advertising accounting for most of a magazine’s revenues, a relaunch will necessarily be driven by advertisers and their needs. Under that overarching concern, particular reasons for relaunching include: an increasingly competitive marketplace; a declining audience and/or shifting demographics; a new editor and/or publisher; and a stale format and/or design.

In recent years, a number of notable Canadian magazines have relaunched themselves, including *Saturday Night*, *Western Living* and *Maclean’s*. *Saturday Night*, in particular, has seen numerous makeovers, often tied to changes in editor/publisher/owner and fluctuations in financial fortune; the two most recent relaunches have been the most drastic. In May 2000, the magazine became a weekly, an over-sized (10x12) supplement to the *National Post* in the style of the *New York Times* magazine (combining clever

front-of-book content, in-depth features and regular departments on food, fashion and décor). At that time, *Saturday Night* was owned by Hollinger Inc., which also owned the *National Post*; it was widely believed³⁸ that the perennial money-loser was turned into a weekly to create printing efficiencies at Hollinger (printing more, thus bringing the per-magazine cost down), as well as to drive subscription sales for the *Post*. Less than a year and a half later, *Saturday Night* and the *National Post* were under new ownership — CanWest Global — and there was less tolerance for a magazine that, still, was bleeding red ink: in September of 2001, with estimated annual losses in the order of \$10 million³⁹, *Saturday Night* was closed down.

The remnants of the magazine were subsequently purchased by Multi-Vision Publishing, and in April of 2002 — after a seven-month publishing hiatus — *Saturday Night* was relaunched as a glossy bi-monthly. As with its weekly incarnation, where business considerations (printing efficiencies, subscription sales) largely dictated the magazine's form, the new *Saturday Night* is a product of extra-editorial considerations. Its form loosely follows that of other Multi-Vision publications (particularly *Elm Street*) as a glossy, low-frequency, standard-sized magazine with advertiser-friendly content (less investigative journalism, more personality profiles and fashion spreads). Also, as a controlled-circulation magazine, *Saturday Night* is part of the “Multi-Vision package” (*Elm Street*, *The Look*) that is distributed through the *National Post*; once again, the magazine's relaunch is being used to sell newspapers.

The *Western Living* relaunch in May of 2002 was prompted by multiple factors: a new publisher, a new editor, a tired format and declining readership. A decade earlier, *Western Living* had been one of the top ten magazines in Canada (in terms of advertising revenue)⁴⁰, but in recent years, it had lost both readers and editorial relevance; as a result, advertisers abandoned the magazine to the point where, in 2000, it could no longer be

³⁸ *Marketing* magazine, May 1, 2002, p. 4

³⁹ *Canadian Press Newswire*, November 2, 2001

⁴⁰ *Marketing* magazine, September 23, 2002, p. 21

counted amongst the top 25 magazines in the country⁴¹. The magazine had lost touch with its core audience: it was too Vancouver-centred, and too focused on high-end homes and interior decorating. All this had a rather limited appeal for readers in Regina and Winnipeg. After conducting an extensive reader survey in the fall of 2001, the new editor and publisher discovered that *Western Living* readers wanted a magazine that was down-to-earth and less élitist; one that would talk about homes, but also about gardening, travel, food and recipes, and the people and places of Western Canada. *Western Living*'s primary purpose in relaunching was to improve the product, with the ultimate hope of regaining lost readership.

The most recent, and highest profile, relaunch of a Canadian magazine is *Maclean's* in July of 2002. Similarly to *Western Living*, *Maclean's* was perceived to have lost its editorial relevance; unlike *Western Living*, however, the problem was not one of too narrow a focus, but rather an inappropriate focus. The newsweekly magazine format has been in decline for some time, with electronic news media able to deliver the same information faster. But *Maclean's* was slow to react. Although the magazine had managed to maintain its circulation at about 500,000⁴², it was losing advertisers; so, shortly after being appointed editor in March of 2001, Anthony Wilson-Smith put his foot down and declared that he no longer wanted *Maclean's* "to be last week's news reported next week"⁴³. *Maclean's* subsequently developed a new layout, new logo and new typeface; eliminated its foreign bureaus; and reduced the presence of old-time columnists (like Allan Fotheringham and Peter C. Newman). Most significantly, it has shifted its editorial focus from news to "issues and people", taking it out of direct competition with newspapers, television and the Internet.

⁴¹ www.masthead.ca/t25.htm. Accessed on November 6, 2002

⁴² *Toronto Life*, October 2002, p. 66

⁴³ *Ibid*

7. Why the *Vancouver Magazine* Relaunch?

Part One of this report has pointed to some of the underlying reasons why *Vancouver* magazine needs to relaunch. As with the magazines mentioned in the previous section, the overarching concern is advertising: advertising revenues for *Vancouver* have fallen almost 14 percent in the past four years. Tied to this revenue loss is a decline in readership, as well as a perception amongst readers (largely influenced by thin book sizes) that *Vancouver* magazine has lost its power and influence. In addition, *Vancouver* does not seem well equipped to defend its position, as the city magazine of record, should a formidable competitor decide to enter the market. What if Multi-Vision — publishers of *Toronto Life*, *Vancouver Fashion* and the *Where* city publications — decided to enter the Vancouver market? In 1998, Key Media (now part of Multi-Vision) successfully launched a *Toronto Life* spin-off in Ottawa, *Ottawa City*. In anticipation of such competition in Vancouver, a study was done in July of 2002 (by this author, for the publishers of *Vancouver* magazine) of *Toronto Life*: its editorial structure, its advertising base, its circulation and its readership. *Toronto Life*'s strengths and weaknesses were analyzed, and comparisons were drawn between it and the mid-2002 incarnation of *Vancouver* magazine; results from that study will be explored in Part Three of this report.

Part Two: The City Magazine – Three Editors’ Perspectives

1. Background

Inevitably, the new *Vancouver* magazine will represent a compromise: between the business needs of the publisher and advertisers, and the creative wants of the editorial and art departments. Pragmatic decisions will be made on which signature elements go where, what goes on the cover and how the magazine is promoted. This section deals with a more abstract perspective — the role of city magazines, as seen by academics and professionals — and takes some of the available writing on the subject and evaluates it in the context of interviews conducted with three *Vancouver* magazine editors. Although there has been relatively little written about city magazines, there are a handful of articles that address the distinct concerns of publishing a city magazine. On an academic level, Professor Ernest Hynds — (then) head of the Department of Journalism at the University of Georgia — published a study in the *Mass Comm Review* (January 1995) called “City Magazines Have Diverse Roles”⁴⁴; in that study, Hynds surveyed editors at 58 city magazines across the United States on their perceptions of the role, content and influence of city magazines. On an informal level, *Folio* magazine polled a number of editors and publishers for their December 1, 2000 issue, establishing 11 maxims that constitute, in their collective opinion, a “winning formula for success”. Each of the *Vancouver* magazine editors interviewed was asked to respond to two questions from the Hynds study, and offer his opinions on the maxims of the “*Folio* formula”. Results from these discussions are detailed in the pages to follow.

⁴⁴ Ernest C. Hynds, *Mass Comm Review*, January 1995, pp. 90-99

2. Hynds Survey

What is the primary function, or most important role, of a city magazine?

In the Hynds survey, 93 percent of editors agreed that, “providing information about living in the city and lifestyles and providing information about food, travel and entertainment were important functions” of a city magazine, while 54 percent felt that “providing an alternative viewpoint to that of the local newspaper(s)” was an important function; 82 percent felt that “pointing out community problems and needs” was an important function. When asked the same question, Matthew Mallon (editor, 2002 - present) responded that the primary function of *Vancouver* magazine is to “explain the city to its inhabitants”⁴⁵. As for providing an alternative to the local newspapers, Mallon said that the more voices a media environment has, the better. “A city magazine,” said Mallon, “should have some role as a media analyst of the papers of record, because (the papers) certainly don’t comment on themselves. We’re in a situation right now where we have a monopoly in town, and things are happening as a result of that.”

As for commenting on public affairs and community needs, Mallon said: “The added value you get from reading a (city) magazine is that, hopefully, we have better writers, and we take a little longer to go over our stories. We give our readers better analysis, better contextualizing, better perspective.” In addressing the question of what the primary role of a city magazine is, Mallon also made a point of differentiating between the two different types of city magazines. There is the city magazine whose focus is “‘The Ten Best Cosmetic Surgeons’ and ‘15 Great Ways to Make Your Garage Look Like a Den’”, and there are many successful, cash-generating publications like that”. And then there is a magazine like what *Vancouver* magazine aspires to be: “(a city

⁴⁵ Interview with Matthew Mallon, December 4, 2002

magazine) that seeks to play an active role in the community, helping to make the community better in a fundamental way.”

Jim Sutherland (editor, 1993-1999) approached the question from both a business and an editorial perspective. From a business point of view, city magazines represent an invaluable medium for local advertisers: “there are certain ad categories that, otherwise, have no real way of being (promoted): fine dining restaurants, a lot of things that appeal equally to tourists and residents. You need a focused, glossy way to advertise that stuff”⁴⁶. From an editorial perspective, Sutherland feels that “there’s a service rational related to, essentially, those same ad categories: higher-end, focused lifestyle things — foods and restaurants, fashion and shopping, attractions and getaways. There is also, within cities, a desire for a more authoritative, higher production value, comprehensive, opinionated, and more considered take on things than the other, more regular media (can provide).” Sutherland does not believe that city magazines need to provide an alternative to the local newspaper, although he does think that “there is room for (a city magazine) to be qualitatively different. The alternative view? That’s more the role of alternative publications and websites; we’re not really meant to be alternatives, we’re meant to be supplements.” Insofar as reporting on public affairs is concerned, Sutherland thinks that it is important, because “a city magazine tends to be of most interest to people who are most involved in the life of the city, and so that kind of reporting is of interest to them.”

While Malcolm Parry (editor, 1975-1987 and 1990) agrees that providing information about the city is a vital role for a city magazine, he also argues that its mandate should be broader: “to inform, (to) entertain and (to) develop (the) talents of writers, photographers and illustrators”⁴⁷. Especially as it relates to developing talent, Parry argues that there are relatively few venues for local writers and artists to get their start, and city magazines represent one of those venues. As for whether a city magazine

⁴⁶ Interview with Jim Sutherland, December 2, 2002

⁴⁷ Interview with Malcolm Parry, December 3, 2002

should provide an alternative to the city papers, Parry does not think that that is necessary; like Jim Sutherland, he feels that city magazines complement, and ought not compete with, newspapers. Parry believes that city magazines have an important role to play in reporting and commenting on public affairs and community problems, as they have the “advantage of reflection”; a city magazine, says Parry, “can slice the pie a little more thinly” and “make (reading it) a more seductive experience.”

What is the role and influence of labeled commentary in city magazines?

More than half (59 percent) of the editors in the Hynds survey said that they take stands on issues through opinion writing; 66 percent said they “felt free to comment on local issues”, while 57 percent said that they believed that their commentary has had an influence on readers. In Matthew Mallon’s opinion, though, labeled commentary should be used “very sparingly”; “a city magazine should try to appear as independent and objective as possible.” Mallon also says that he feels “completely free” to comment on local issues, despite occasional negative feedback from the publisher. As for having an influence with such commentary, Mallon cites the November 2002 profile of then-mayoral candidate (and now Mayor) Larry Campbell as playing some small part in the November elections. While Mallon concedes that the article “did not cause, by any means, the landslide (for Campbell and the COPE party),” he claims that anecdotal evidence suggests that the article had an influence on the outcome. The magazine — Mallon points out — is delivered directly to affluent neighbourhoods, to “people who tend to vote” and vote for COPE’s opponents (the NPA); these affluent voters would have been more receptive to the Campbell article because it was from a publication that they trusted, and because it was an “ideologically objective” piece of writing.

Jim Sutherland believes that a city magazine “should take up an issue once or twice a year”, but that opinion writing should be clearly labeled, “where reporters report

and columnists and the editorial pages take positions”; nevertheless, people do want city magazines to “have opinions and to take stands”, says Sutherland. He also indicates that he has always felt free to comment on local issues, although he stresses the importance of doing “due diligence” to avoid costing the magazine money. Insofar as having had an influence in shaping a debate, Sutherland cites the May 1993 *Vancouver* magazine profile of Kim Campbell, written by Peter C. Newman. The article was excerpted in newspapers across the county, including Canada’s largest circulation paper, the *Toronto Star*. In the article, Campbell made her infamous critique of voter apathy, claiming those who criticize from outside the political system are nothing but “condescending SOBs”⁴⁸; “to hell with them,” she proclaimed. Although Campbell would go on to win her party’s leadership, Sutherland feels that the *Vancouver* magazine profile added to a developing public perception of Campbell’s arrogance that, amongst other factors, led to her defeat in the October 1993 general election.

Malcolm Parry thinks that “it’s a given that (a city magazine) should be principled in its approach”, but he doesn’t believe that it should be gratuitously opinionated. Parry says that a city magazine needs to build trust amongst its readers before introducing labeled commentary into the fold, and that if you employ columnists who don’t fit within your editorial environment, then “you’re being indulgent”. As for the freedom he had as editor to comment on local issues, Parry claims that he was particularly lucky, especially under publisher Ron Stern (1975-1983). Stern, says Parry, was “the ideal publisher”: someone who was not interested in micromanaging the editorial process, and who didn’t “seek to assign blame for things you went into (with) a good conscience”. Parry thinks that the *Vancouver* magazine of the late-1970s and early-1980s was very influential in the field of civic politics, with columnist Sean Rossiter influencing (and being influenced by) debates in council; Parry also identifies society columnist Valerie Gibson as having had

⁴⁸ *Vancouver* magazine, May 1993, p. 90

great influence in social circles, and columnist (and Greenpeace co-founder) Bob Hunter as having helped to shape many environmental debates.

3. *Folio's* Formula for Success

“Focus on a community readers identify with”

In the *Folio* article, various publishers and editors comment upon how crucial it is for a city or regional magazine to connect with its audience on both a geographic and a demographic basis. Says Evan Smith, editor of *Texas Monthly*: “The unifying spirit, the connective tissue that binds the audience, is some sort of loyalty and love for this geographic destination”⁴⁹. While that is true for Texas, it is not true for New York or Ontario, where there is no unified identification across the state or province (upstate New Yorkers and northern Ontarians have as little to do with Manhattan and Toronto, respectively, as they do with each other). In B.C., there is a somewhat unique situation: Vancouverites identify with both the natural splendor of their province (in magazines such as *Beautiful BC*) and the sophistication of their urban environment (in magazines such as *Vancouver* magazine). Accordingly, there is an appetite throughout the Greater Vancouver/Lower Mainland area for a city magazine that speaks to all of Vancouver. The problem, according to Matthew Mallon, is that too few residents are aware that they have a city magazine, because for too long, *Vancouver* magazine has “restricted (itself)...to being a dining magazine for West Vancouver and for the Westside”.

Jim Sutherland says that, when he was editor, he identified his audience as being “people who are engaged in the life of Vancouver”. “It didn’t matter where they lived, it didn’t matter what their demographic was, it didn’t matter how much money they made,” says Sutherland. “If they felt they took an active interest in the life of the city, then they

⁴⁹ *Folio*, December 1, 2000, p. 25

would enjoy *Vancouver* magazine. As it happens, the kind of people who would take an active interest in the life of the city would tend to be affluent.” Sutherland isn’t too concerned about the magazine’s historical focus on the North Shore and the Westside, because “that’s where people want to live”; the “bridge and tunnel crowd”, as Sutherland refers the rest of the Greater Vancouver area, have community newspapers to tell them about themselves, and want their city magazine to focus on the “big city”. Malcolm Parry, alternatively, believes that a city magazine should represent something of a smorgasbord, where enough different dishes are put on the table so that anyone can make a meal out of it; rather than trying to figure out what a particular geographic or demographic market wants, Parry argues that a city magazine’s focus should be to “reflect the community of views of the people who make (the magazine)”.

“Remain true to your roots”

The above maxim is particularly relevant in the United States, where some publishers — such as Emmis Communications and Wiesner Publishing — own multiple city magazines and the temptation exists to “come up with a boilerplate and then use it across the country,”⁵⁰ as the editorial director of Emmis, Deborah Paul, says. With *Vancouver* magazine, it isn’t as much of an issue: although owned by a large publisher based in Montréal, it is a unique property within the Transcontinental stable and its only city magazine. As such, *Vancouver* magazine’s editorial direction originates from Vancouver, and the magazine’s interpretation of the city it covers is entirely homegrown. There are, however, divergent opinions amongst the *Vancouver* editors surveyed as to what those defining characteristics of Vancouver are, and whether the magazine needs to reflect them. According to Matthew Mallon, Vancouver is a “curiously self-involved” city, and his job as editor of *Vancouver* magazine is not to represent that insularity, but to “lead

⁵⁰ *Folio*, December 1, 2002, p. 26

our readers into a more outwardly involved direction. We would like to connect them more with the larger community in which they live.” Jim Sutherland thinks that *Vancouver* magazine does a good job of representing the character of Vancouver (an “adventuresome, polyglot, conflicted, nature-oriented” city), while Malcolm Parry believes that *Vancouver* magazine’s job is, in fact, to “reflect the changing character of the city”.

“Be the source of local information”

With the glut of information available to urban dwellers, a city magazine has to stand out as a “must-read” publication. Matthew Mallon believes that, increasingly, *Vancouver* is a must-read magazine: “it provides you with a level of access to your city that you won’t find in any other publication, and a level of analysis and contextualization that will provide you with a greater understanding of where you live.” Jim Sutherland believes that the magazine is a must-read publication for particular categories, such as restaurants and shopping; he also believes there is potential to develop an expertise with in-depth political or civic reportage. Malcolm Parry does not think that *Vancouver* magazine is a must-read for anything at this point, although he does think that there are a substantial number of things published in the magazine that if you don’t read, “you’ve missed out” on potential material for water-cooler conversation.

“Be an authoritative voice”

On a similar note, the *Folio* article argues that information is not enough, and that the authority of a city magazine on a particular subject is what counts; “they can say something’s good, but it’s not good until *New York* says so,” in the words of Alan Katz, that magazine’s publisher. With *Vancouver* magazine, the authority — or the perception

of authority — lies with the magazine’s restaurant coverage, and its high-profile restaurant reviewer, Jamie Maw. Matthew Mallon also thinks that *Vancouver* magazine has some authority in shopping, and is developing some authority in the real-estate category (with real-estate features now a part of both the March and November issues, Mallon has hopes that, in the future, “people (will) consult *Vancouver* magazine before launching into any real-estate decisions”). Jim Sutherland believes that there is potential authority for *Vancouver* magazine in the role of “a knowing, opinionated, skeptical observer of trends and lifestyles”; “you could know what’s going on,” says Sutherland about this role for the magazine, “and have a sense of what an appropriate ‘take’ would be on what’s going on.” Malcolm Parry also thinks that the advertising found in *Vancouver* magazine lends an air of authority to the publication: that good ads and advertisers beget other quality advertisers and provide a “sustaining environment for readers”.

“Offer a unique point of view”

While Canada has a number of cities where there are competing, separately owned local newspapers (Toronto, Montreal, Halifax), such is rarely the case in the United States; as a result, many of the editors polled for the *Folio* article cited the need to provide an alternative to the dailies as an important role for their city magazine. Vancouver is in a similar situation, with one owner for both dailies, but as discussed in a previous section, the editors of *Vancouver* magazine have mixed opinions on the importance of being “an alternative”. Matthew Mallon thinks that *Vancouver* magazine does offer a unique point of view, even without the explicit aim of being an alternative to the local newspapers. He says that expressing a differing perspective on city life isn’t always easy — “there will always be pressure on you to put out a safer publication” — but he also agrees with the sentiment, expressed by Wick Allison, editor and publisher of Dallas’ *D* magazine, that

“there’s no such thing as leadership without opposition”⁵¹. Jim Sutherland believes that, with a few brief lapses over the years, *Vancouver* magazine has stood out as a “bright, smart, shiny, sophisticated” magazine, and one that is “not afraid to give voice to alternative voices, but nevertheless (tries) to characterize a kind of all-knowing, all-seeing, sophisticated point of view”. Malcolm Parry believes that a city magazine such as *Vancouver* magazine should stand for several “unique points of view”, and that they should be ideologically varied.

“Become a bridge between readers and advertisers”

In the *Folio* article, various efforts to bring advertisers and readers together are cited; one such example is *Chicago* magazine, which extends its “Most Eligible Singles” issue into a marketing event — a singles party — hosted by a local furniture store (and advertiser). *Vancouver* magazine, in recent years, has not had much money to devote to marketing, so much of the bridge building has occurred within the pages of the magazine. Matthew Mallon cites The Goods section in *Vancouver* magazine as one example: it “provides readers with the very latest” on local retailers, some of whom are advertisers but many of whom are not. On the whole, though, Mallon says his bigger focus is on “creating an interesting environment for (the advertisers)”. He recounts an anecdote from the ad representative of fashion house Kenneth Cole: when asked whether he wanted more fashion spreads in the magazine, the rep said no; what he wanted was “better and longer articles” to keep readers on the page longer, making them more likely to see the Kenneth Cole ad on the page opposite.

Jim Sutherland says that *Vancouver* magazine would like to do more in terms of promotion, but “has been hamstrung by not having a marketing person”. The question, says Sutherland, is whether “it is enough to give or sell people a magazine, or do you

⁵¹ *Folio*, December 1, 2000, p. 26

want to try to talk them into joining your club, the way *Toronto Life* does”; with the December 2, 2002 hiring of a marketing manager, Avra Goldenblatt, Transcontinental has signaled its intent to start building such bridges. In the 1980s, when Malcolm Parry was editor, *Vancouver* magazine used to put on elaborate fashion shows 12–14 times a year; these shows, which the magazine would charge admission for, were used, in conjunction with quarterly fashion supplements in the magazine, to support local fashion retailers.

“Interact with readers”

Paid-subscription magazines can interact with their readers through various feedback mechanisms. One example is that of *Toronto Life*’s “subscriber lunches”, where a random sample of subscribers are brought in periodically to voice their opinions to the editor. *Texas Monthly*, on the other hand, gets feedback through off-the-record meetings with prominent citizens (local politicians, sports figures, musicians and community activists), an approach that could also work for a controlled-circulation publication like *Vancouver* magazine. To date, though, relatively little has been done to interact with readers. Matthew Mallon says that, other than focus groups (which are used sporadically, usually when the publication is being relaunched) and letters to the editor, there is no formal mechanism for readers to offer feedback. Jim Sutherland says that while *Vancouver* magazine doesn’t do a particularly good job at encouraging interactivity with readers, he’s “not completely convinced that the magazine gets that much out of it” anyway, and that there aren’t better ways for a magazine to spend its time and money. Malcolm Parry says that one way that *Vancouver* magazine enlivened its debate with readers during his editorship was to publish “only excoriating” letters to the editor.

“Keep sales and editorial sides apart”

While the separation of “church and state” is an issue for every magazine, it is particularly relevant for city magazines, where the advertisers are the readers and, often, the editorial subject matter. While some city magazines make a point of maintaining a clear division between the two sides — *Toronto Life*, famously, keeps editorial and advertising staff on separate floors — other magazines, like *Vancouver*, are less concerned about putting up walls. Matthew Mallon says that while his magazine does a good job at delineating the competing interests of editorial and advertising, he is also “open to discussions” with advertising reps on the content of the magazine. Jim Sutherland states that he does not believe that “it is necessarily wrong to be aware of the advertising climate. Usually there is something that you can do to ease a problem (for advertisers) that doesn’t really cost you anything, and doesn’t cost your readers anything.” Going even further, Malcolm Parry argues that sales reps are an “extremely good source for opinions on what’s going on” at a street level, and that conversely, it is a “really good idea that (reps) know what you’re trying to do” with the magazine when talking with their advertising clients.

“Develop a web presence”

The debate amongst publishers, as expressed in the *Folio* article, is how much information to give away on a website, not whether or not to have a website. Some city magazines have comprehensive websites, with searchable restaurant databases and complete archives of past content; other sites, such as *Vancouver* magazine’s, provide “teasers” of current content, encouraging (in theory) people to buy and read the magazine for the full story. Matthew Mallon believes that “part of your authority comes from having a good website”. “Also,” says Mallon, “there’s a huge market that’s untapped for

Vancouver magazine: tourists. We're often the first thing that comes up on a search engine when someone is looking for information on 'Vancouver'". He believes that the magazine should "re-focus a big chunk of our website to the tourists' needs." Jim Sutherland thinks that a website is important, but he does not believe "that a lot of resources should be thrown at it. I don't think you have to dominate the web, with regards to your city." Malcolm Parry thinks that *Vancouver* magazine should actually expand the scope of its website, and offer users "as much access to what you've done as possible".

"Seek national advertisers"

As discussed previously, national advertising — because of the lower cost of sales in obtaining it and because of fewer design challenges with full-page national ads — is highly sought after. Each of the *Vancouver* magazine editors surveyed has had to contend with the fickle interests of national advertisers and accept the fact that city magazines are a secondary buy for most advertising agencies (that is, after national advertising vehicles have been exhausted, an agency may choose to "heavy up" coverage in a particular geographic or demographic market). From Matthew Mallon's perspective, what national advertisers are looking for is a credible vehicle for reaching affluent Vancouverites; "part of what sells an advertisement in our magazine," says Mallon, "is our air of credibility". According to Jim Sutherland, city magazines like *Vancouver* magazine fill a niche for national advertisers in Canada, "because the Canadian magazine industry is not as well developed as in the U.S." and as a result, there are relatively few national publications for advertisers to choose amongst. Malcolm Parry argues that national advertisers are hard to attract because it is difficult to know what their agency's marketing objectives are; also, Parry points out that to get national advertisers, you need to have national advertisers (that is, national advertisers need a precedent for advertising).

“Get involved (in the community)”

Successful city magazines become entrenched in the life of their communities through good content, as well as through good deeds. On the good content front, Matthew Mallon believes that *Vancouver* magazine has a “slightly more activist agenda” than it used to have; this, he believes, makes up for the fact that the magazine has had a limited marketing budget in recent years for sponsoring community events. Jim Sutherland says that the business focus of the magazine has “always been on selling ads. It hasn’t been on increasing profile, and it hasn’t been on developing leadership” within the community. Malcolm Parry believes that part of the difficulty for *Vancouver* magazine is size: while it is relatively easy for an advertising behemoth like the *Georgia Straight* or the *Vancouver Sun* to trade advertising pages for sponsorship of a particular community event, for *Vancouver* magazine, scant ad pages are relatively hard to sacrifice. Only when the magazine is flush with ads — such as in the 1980s, when *Vancouver* held regular fashion shows — can the magazine be as active in the community as it might like to be.

Part Three: Preparing for the Relaunch

1. The *Toronto Life* Study

Background and History

Although planning for the *Vancouver* magazine relaunch predates any discussions about Multi-Vision introducing a *Toronto Life*-like product into the Vancouver market, a study of *Toronto Life* is worthy in and by itself: it is the preeminent city magazine in Canada, and one of the most lauded magazines of any kind in this country. *Toronto Life* was started around the same time as *Vancouver* magazine — 1966 in the former's case, 1967 in the latter's — and each magazine had designs on being the next *New York* magazine (smart, edgy, hard-hitting). As the 1980s progressed, both magazines introduced more service and lifestyles content (restaurant reviews, fashion features), but *Toronto Life* maintained a certain edginess, with remnants of the in-depth reportage that *Vancouver* magazine had dispensed with. While *Vancouver* magazine became more entrenched in its city's power structure, *Toronto Life* was more likely to offend the local power structure.

This was no more apparent than in the case of the Reichmanns and the *Toronto Life* investigative article about them, published in November of 1987. Toronto journalist Elaine Dewar had spent the better part of two years researching what would become a 50,000-word story for *Toronto Life* on the Reichmann brothers, then amongst Canada's richest families. The contentious aspect of the story focused on the Reichmanns' early history and specifically, the time that the brothers' parents had spent in Morocco during World War II⁵². In January of 1988, the Reichmann brothers sued *Toronto Life* for \$102 million (one of the largest libel actions in Canadian history), claiming that the article had defamed their family; by February of 1991, after three years of expensive legal wrangling, an out-of-court settlement was reached. The settlement would see the

⁵² *Maclean's*, March 25, 1991, p. 59

magazine make “substantial donations” to four charities of the Reichmanns’ choosing and publish a full-page apology — in the March 1991 issue — declaring that “any and all negative insinuations and allegations in the article...are totally false”⁵³. While it was widely believed that *Toronto Life* wanted to fight the lawsuit, the associated legal costs had exhausted the magazine’s \$1-million libel insurance by June of 1990 and brought *Toronto Life* to the verge of bankruptcy.

In addition to the Reichmann lawsuit, an economic recession and competition from the *Globe and Mail*’s Toronto magazine soon forced the publishers of *Toronto Life* to re-examine the magazine’s editorial mandate. In late 1992, a new editor, John Macfarlane (who had previously been the magazine’s editor, between 1972 and 1974), was brought in, and he promptly decided to sharpen the magazine’s focus. He recognized that a lot of *Toronto Life*’s articles had relatively little to do with the city: the Reichmann story was but one example, with Dewar traveling to Hungary, Austria, Morocco and Israel to research the family history. In violation of the *Folio* maxim to “remain true to your roots,” *Toronto Life* was regularly veering away from its core audience to tackle business and political stories of national scope. Macfarlane henceforth established that articles and features had to “add to readers’ knowledge of the city, help them to enjoy its riches or help them cope with city living”⁵⁴. He eliminated turn pages, added new columns and introduced a cleaner design and logo, all of which remains more-or-less in place to this date. Since those changes in late 1992, *Toronto Life* has enjoyed many successes: 71 national magazine awards, increased circulation and advertising revenue⁵⁵, and thriving spin-off products (the CityGuide booklets, TorontoLife.com).

⁵³ *Maclean’s*, March 25, 1991, p. 59

⁵⁴ *Masthead*, January 1993, p. 11

⁵⁵ *Toronto Life*, October 2002, p. 17

Editorial

Toronto Life is a much bigger operation than *Vancouver* magazine: 26 staff members, compared to only seven. In addition to the editor-in-chief, *Toronto Life* has an online editor, an assistant to the editor, an executive editor, one chief of copy editing, a copy editor, nine associate editors, a chief of editorial research, four editorial researchers, two editorial interns, one art director, an associate art director, a photo editor, and an art production associate. (Some of these positions — especially in production — may be rationalized, as *Toronto Life* is integrated over the coming years into the Multi-Vision Publishing organization). The key to the magazine's long-lived success has been its predictability, in editorial structure if not always in content. With *Toronto Life*, readers have come to expect that the book will look a certain way: a conservative, newsy design, with features and departments of a certain length and in predictable places.

For the purposes of this study of *Toronto Life*, five consecutive issues of the magazine were analyzed: March, April, May, June and July of 2002; the commonalities discussed below reflect the content from these particular issues (although the format has changed little since 1992). At the front of the book, the This City section opens with a captioned photo from the previous month (a top story, a major event), and also includes Profile (a sketch of a local figure of some importance), Telling Tales (a gossip column), Urban Decoder (a question-and-answer page on urban issues) and Camera (society photos, with captions). This City is followed by the editor's note (This Issue), letters to the editor and This Month, a section of event listings with short reviews (in the style of the *New Yorker*). Finally, the front of the book contains two departments: the subject matter for these monthly columns rotate amongst Crime, Sports, Politics, Pop, Arts, Culture, Media, Health, Education and Business.

The well of the book usually contains three feature stories (one of which, usually, is the cover story) and two photo/text, double-page spreads (DPS); this holds true except

when there is a special theme issue (Who Earns What, Best/Worst of the City), in which case the entire well may be devoted to that theme. In most issues, though, the well starts with a story that is 7-8 pages in length; it is followed by a DPS called Rituals, which — with one page of text and a one-page photo — explores a particular custom or habit, common or uncommon (lining up for a lottery ticket, Saturday morning hockey practice, etc). That DPS is followed by another feature story, also 7-8 pages, which is followed by another DPS called Icons (which, with text and photo, examines a place or thing of local interest: House of Chan restaurant, Gibraltar Point Lighthouse, etc); the well finishes with a final feature story, which runs 5-8 pages in length.

The back of the book contains almost all of *Toronto Life*'s service content (at least, that which is not already covered in the separate CityGuide publications). The back opens with a spread called Super Shopper, which is usually two pages long (although it expands four-to-five-fold for December's Holiday Super Shopper); it features interesting and unique goods selected by trends columnist Karen von Hahn. Super Shopper is usually followed by two departments, Design and Style (occasionally, these two pieces are replaced by a Fashion column); Design is a three-page column written by Katherine Ashenburg, while Style is a one-page, first person profile of a notable Torontonian. After Design and Style is James Chatto's Food column, which runs 4-5 pages in length; the column usually is a profile of a local restaurateur or restaurant, but sometimes is a commentary on a food-related topic. Following Chatto's column is Margaret Swaine's one-page of wine reviews, called Drink; after that, there are 4-5 pages of restaurants reviews and short restaurant news items. The magazine closes with a one-page item called The End, a photo/text obituary of a person or place that has, within the past month, passed on.

As previously mentioned, *Toronto Life* has a number of theme issues (six in 2002), for which the regular departments and features are sacrificed. In 2002, the theme issues were as follows: January, Torontonian of the Year; April, Restaurant Awards; July,

Who Earns What; August, Summer Fiction; November, Photo Essay: City of Athletes/Actors; December, Best & Worst of the City. These issues tend to have a fixed spot on the editorial calendar, year after year, although the Who Earns What issue is relatively new (it began in 2001). Whatever their respective editorial merits, these theme issues are successful newsstand products: the top three issues for 2001, according to *Toronto Life*'s audited circulation statements, were the Restaurant Awards (23,319 newsstand copies sold), the Best & Worst of the City (17,771 copies) and Who Earns What (15,512 copies)⁵⁶.

Also successful have been the CityGuides: digest-sized resource directories that are poly-bagged with subscriber copies of *Toronto Life*. Originally, the CityGuides were a pullout section of the magazine, but high advertiser and reader demand allowed *Toronto Life* to spin this service content off in 1999 to create the monthly digests. According to a subsequent subscriber study, 93 percent of *Toronto Life* subscribers report that the CityGuides were an important factor in their subscription decision, 79 percent said that they preferred having their CityGuides separate from the main magazine, while 75 percent preferred the new digest size⁵⁷. In 2002, the success of the CityGuides spawned two newsstand-only products: *Toronto Life Shopping* and *Toronto Life Eating & Drinking*. Each of these annual publications repackaged the CityGuide content for non-subscribers, and went to market with newsstand draws of 35,000; in October of 2002, John Macfarlane reported that the *Eating & Drinking Guide* had sold 25,000 of its inaugural issue, "making it the best-selling publication *Toronto Life* has ever produced⁵⁸". The CityGuides also address two of the city magazine tenets established by *Folio*: they allow *Toronto Life* to become a "bridge between readers and advertisers", by offering an unadulterated forum for service journalism, while maintaining the clear division between editorial and advertising interests in the magazine itself.

⁵⁶ *Toronto Life* ABC Bi-annual Statements, 2001

⁵⁷ *Toronto Life* 1999 Subscriber Study

⁵⁸ *Toronto Life*, October 2002, p. 17

While the special issues and CityGuides have helped to drive sales, the critical acclaim that *Toronto Life* has received over the past decade is largely attributable to its non-service editorial content. Since 1992, *Toronto Life* has won 71 National Magazine Awards, including five gold medals in 2002 and seven gold medals in 2001; the categories in which *Toronto Life* has been awarded include humour, politics and arts writing, as well as various columns and essays. *Toronto Life* continues to attract leading writers and experts covering a variety of topics: Robert Fulford on media; John Lorinc on Politics; Katherine Ashenberg on design; Karen von Hahn on trends; and the food and drink columnists, James Chatto and Margaret Swaine, respectively; other regular contributors include June Callwood, Sylvia Fraser, Don Gillmor and David Macfarlane.

Advertising

Similar to *Vancouver* magazine, *Toronto Life* relies on a mix of national and retail advertising. Although the revenue figures for *Toronto Life* are not publicly available, a quick review of the July 2002 issue indicates that *Toronto Life* is somewhat more successful at attracting national advertisers than is *Vancouver* magazine: in a 116-page issue, about 55 percent (26 pages) of all non-house, non-promotional run-of-press ads (that is, those ads for which *Toronto Life* is likely to have received actual revenue) are national, compared to 38-45 percent national in *Vancouver* magazine's case. *Toronto Life* has two sales representatives who are devoted to national accounts, in addition to the five representatives who handle retail accounts (as mentioned previously, retail advertising requires more effort for less page space, hence the disproportionate number of representatives). *Toronto Life* is also somewhat less reliant on advertising revenue as a

paid circulation magazine: one estimate puts *Toronto Life*'s ad revenue at 77 percent of total revenues⁵⁹ (compared to about 95 percent for *Vancouver* magazine).

In total, between June 2001 and May 2002, *Toronto Life* had 688.58 pages of run-of-press (ROP) advertising, compared to 341.78 pages for *Vancouver* magazine⁶⁰. While *Toronto Life* is published 12 times a year (compared to ten times a year for *Vancouver*), a major advantage for *Toronto Life* is the breadth of its advertising base: whereas 67 percent of *Vancouver* magazine's ROP advertising comes from its top ten categories, only 56 percent of *Toronto Life*'s ROP advertising comes from its top 10 categories⁶¹. Passenger Cars and Vehicles is, similar to *Vancouver*, the top advertising category, but *Toronto Life* also benefits from being in one of North America's leading entertainment centres: in the category "Amusements, Events and Miscellaneous Entertainment", *Toronto Life* counted 58.33 ROP ad pages, compared to only 4.83 in *Vancouver* magazine. Other categories in which *Toronto Life* does well — and in which *Vancouver* has little or no presence — include Furniture and Appliance Stores, Schools and Colleges, and Financial Services.

Circulation

As a paid-circulation magazine, *Toronto Life* has a keen interest in knowing who subscribes to it and who buys it off the newsstand. *Toronto Life* has an average paid circulation base of 92,004 copies⁶², which includes 77,214 subscribers and monthly single-copy sales in the order of 14,790. (There are 5,256 copies, on average, of non-paid circulation). The average paid subscription price is \$19.17 for 12 issues (10 issues of *Fashion* magazine are also sent to subscribers), while the single copy cover price is

⁵⁹ www.masthead.ca/t25.htm. Accessed on November 27, 2002

⁶⁰ Source: LNA Canada, from an internal company document

⁶¹ Ibid

⁶² *Toronto Life* ABC statement for the six months ended December 31, 2001

\$4.50. As might be expected, almost all of the circulation is in Ontario (98 percent), with the vast majority (88 percent) of copies circulating within the Greater Toronto Area. To maintain its high circulation levels, *Toronto Life* employs a consumer marketing department of six, and is constantly seeking ways to enhance the public profile of the *Toronto Life* brand; current efforts in brand promotion include a joint subscription drive with the *Toronto Star*, a point-of-sale distribution deal with Starbucks, and part-ownership of a new television station, Toronto One⁶³. This sort of community involvement, which *Folio* cites as being critical to a city magazine's success, has helped not only to build circulation for *Toronto Life*, but also to build goodwill for its brand.

Subscription levels for *Toronto Life* tend to be relatively stable (in 2001, monthly fluctuations ran from 75,150 to 81,064), with single-copy sales having a somewhat higher variance; as with *Vancouver* magazine, the Restaurant Awards issue is *Toronto Life*'s biggest seller (23,319 copies, in April 2001), while the rest of the year's sales range from 12,693 copies (June 2001) to 17,771 copies (December 2001). Interestingly, even regular, non-themed covers tend to sell well (March 2001: 14,842; October 2001: 15,066), indicating that *Toronto Life* is capable of being a newsstand seller without the aid of gimmickry. In terms of subscriptions, one of the ways by which *Toronto Life* judges what works is through the afore-mentioned subscriber lunches, when subscribers get to tell John Macfarlane exactly what they think of the magazine, good and bad. As for *Toronto Life*'s commitment to the paid-circulation model — a rarity amongst Canadian city magazines — Macfarlane has said this: "I think there are journalistic reasons to be committed to it...but also I'm committed to it as a business model, because without the mechanism of the commercial exchange between reader and magazine, there is no way of really knowing if what you're doing is working or not."⁶⁴

⁶³ Scheduled to be launched in the fall of 2003

⁶⁴ *Report on Business* magazine, June 2002, p. 72

Readership

In 2002, *Toronto Life* was measured as having 986,000 readers⁶⁵, which translates into over ten readers per circulated copy. In terms of its reader demographics, *Toronto Life* is very similar to *Vancouver* magazine: the split between male and female readers is relatively even (53 and 47 percent, respectively, in *Toronto Life*'s case); the average age is identical, at 41; and the average household income is also moderately high, at \$65,348⁶⁶. In the all-important segment of MOPEs⁶⁷, *Toronto Life* counts 29 percent of its readership as being in that category, for an Index number of 166 (meaning that *Toronto Life* readers are 66 percent more likely than the average Canadian to be a MOPE). One distinct advantage that *Toronto Life* has over *Vancouver* magazine is a lack of direct competition: while there are weekly newspapers, like *NOW* and *eye*, there is no city magazine (like *Vancouver Lifestyles*) which is aggressively going after the same readers, distributing in the same neighbourhoods and calling on the same advertisers.

2. Planning the New *Vancouver* Magazine

On July 18, 2002, the findings of the *Toronto Life* study were presented, and an initial brainstorming session for the new *Vancouver* magazine was held. The attendees of the session included: the publisher, Lance Neale; the editorial director, Jim Sutherland; the editor, Matthew Mallon; (then) associate editor, Alisa Smith; the editorial assistant, Rebecca Philips; the associate art director, Lisa Thé; and the advertising sales manager, Janet Macdonald (also in attendance, from *Western Living*: Lila MacLellan, Anicka Quin and this author). The model for the *Vancouver* magazine relaunch was the May 2002 relaunch of *Western Living* magazine; unlike with the *Western Living* initiative, however,

⁶⁵ Print Measurement Bureau, 2002 Readership Study

⁶⁶ PMB 2002

⁶⁷ Senior Managers/Owners of Businesses/Professionals

there was no initial desire to conduct formal market research for *Vancouver* magazine, so all content ideas would have to be generated internally.

The session on July 18th had two foci: to examine the present situation at *Vancouver* magazine and at other city magazines; and to discuss what new look, and what new editorial platforms, *Vancouver* magazine would need to “give the sales force something to talk about”. As mentioned earlier, advertising needs are the primary motivation for any such relaunch, a truism that tends to make editorial people cynical about the process. “My experience of relaunches,” says former *Vancouver* editor Malcolm Parry, “is that they are usually devices to mask structural decay or to give advertising and marketing folk a chance to sidestep past errors”⁶⁸. That said, such brainstorming sessions present a rare opportunity to re-examine the way things are being done, why they’re being done that way, and how things could be done differently; in the quotidian routine of magazine publishing, with tight production schedules to adhere to, such introspective analysis is hard to come by. Throughout the day’s discussions, one question, raised in the Hynds survey ten years earlier, reigned supreme: what should be the primary function of this city magazine?

At the end of the July session, a list was created of “Do’s and Don’ts” for the new magazine. It was agreed that service sells, and that service journalism would continue to be a key element of the new *Vancouver* magazine. It was also agreed that *Vancouver* magazine needed to establish a new point of authority, in addition to its strength in restaurants; the signature elements for the new *Vancouver* magazine would cover (at the very least) the world of restaurants, fashion, society, shopping and travel. The new *Vancouver* magazine needed to be in touch with the spirit of the times, and be in touch with the city; it was widely felt that the magazine of the past few years had been removed from both, offering an editorial perspective of the fringes of Vancouver life where relatively few of the magazine’s readers were (or cared to be). It was argued that the new

⁶⁸ Email message, November 7, 2002

magazine should have a mix of fresh, new writers, as well as regular columnists who have a profile in the community; there was also a common belief that the personality of the editor needed to become more apparent throughout the pages of the magazine. On the negative side, it was argued that issues with people on the cover, and issues with bad art direction, tended not to sell well; that a magazine that was too “obvious”, without enough “surprising” content, would be a failure; and that a magazine without strong feature content, and too much emphasis on service, would result in a bland product.

After those generalities had been introduced, a smaller group was convened on August 23rd to discuss specific editorial elements for the new magazine; the newly assembled group included all the editorial participants from the original meeting plus Tom Brown, the *Vancouver* magazine art director. Most of the discussion centred on signature elements for the front-of-book (FOB) and back-of-book (BOB), as the look of the feature well would vary from issue to issue; the discussion began by highlighting “best practices”, signature elements from other magazines that could be adopted. Examples of such practices include: the Annotation (*Harper’s*), where a photograph or illustration of an object is deconstructed; the Charticle (*Vanity Fair*, *Spy*, etc), where a chart/graph device is used to tell a story; a Q&A (*Vanity Fair*, *New York Times* magazine) with a public figure; and an interactive advice column, like *Toronto Life’s* Decoder, where readers write in with questions about their city. In addition to this, it was thought that there should be a regular column on civic issues, an expanded arts section, and a travel column with a more regional focus.

On November 15th, a preliminary plan for *Vancouver* magazine’s relaunched signature elements was presented to the publisher and editorial director. A new logo treatment was shown, described by Matthew Mallon as “san-serif, simple, contemporary without being too of-the-moment”⁶⁹. The Editor’s Note would remain as is, but would be more clearly labeled as a Letter from the Editor (at present, there is no indication that the

⁶⁹ Transcontinental Media, internal company document

note is written by the editor). There would be a new Neighbourhood Watch civic reportage column — which would feature politics, society or neighbourhood news — as well as a higher profile column for Steve Burgess. (Mallon mentioned the importance of labeling and highlighting this column: “Steve’s a celebrity now and we ought to leverage that”⁷⁰). Other new FOB elements include: two charticles, Convention Watch (a humorous look at how one can identify various conventions in town during the month: the participants, their favourite foods, their attire, etc) and Barometer (what’s “wet” and what’s “dry”, in terms of trends/personalities/events); a regular Q&A page; an interactive advice column on city manners (generated by reader letters); and Extreme Vancouver (a photo/text page on some quintessentially-Vancouver activity or behaviour). Returning FOB elements include: an expanded Vancouver Life society column from Malcolm Parry, and an expanded arts calendar containing three regular sections (Art, Music and Nightlife) with featured critics and columnists.

In terms of the BOB elements, a new Style section is proposed, with a lead page and a 300-word essay. Other proposed elements include: a periodic Homes and Gardens section; a regular one-page column on local getaways by James Barber (supplementing the regular travel feature); Outlander, a recreation column by Alisa Smith (with Gearbox, a sidebar on associated gear for that rec activity by Mark Mallet); and Noted, an annotated back-page photo which captures an element of city life. Returning BOB elements include: The Goods, a double-page spread on consumer items by fashion reporter Wendy Underwood (to now incorporate: Shopping Diary, a month in the life of a shopaholic, with details on new store openings; Beauty Spot, with information about new beauty products; and the regular win-a-product contest section); a more clearly-labeled Keys to the City section (which features insider information on the good life); and Diner, the food column by Jamie Maw (to be supplemented with shorter reviews of casual dining by other editorial staff members). With this blueprint, a mock-up of the April

⁷⁰ Transcontinental Media, internal company document

relaunch issue would start production in December, ready for focus group testing in late January.

3. A Change in Course: Market Research for the Relaunch

By late October, the decision to not conduct market research for the relaunch had been reversed. The publisher felt that if Transcontinental was to make a serious effort at re-shaping *Vancouver* magazine, the company should first get some feedback from readers. In early November, Vancouver-based research firm Bengtson & Associates polled a random sample of names from *Vancouver* magazine's controlled-circulation list, and asked them questions about themselves, about their city and about their magazine preferences. Of the 401 people who responded (and who met the 18-plus age minimum), 73.3 percent claimed to have read *Vancouver* magazine within the past month (66.6 percent had read *Western Living*, 46.4 percent had read the *Georgia Straight* and 39.7 percent had read *Vancouver Lifestyles* magazine); *Vancouver* magazine was identified by 18 percent of respondents as their favourite local magazine (after first-place *Western Living*, at 25.7 percent).

Interviewees were asked to “think about city magazines like *Vancouver* magazine” and state their preferences, by choosing one from a pair of statements. Here are some of their responses:

- 74.1 percent would rather have a city magazine that “contains lots of stories selected because they’re interesting topics, regardless of who the writer is”, 20.2 percent favoured regular columns written by familiar writers;

- 49.6 percent would rather have a city magazine that “contains lots of information and tips about eating and entertaining at home”, while 42.9 percent favoured content with lots of bar/restaurant news and views;
- 52.4 percent would rather have a “more gentle magazine that’s more oriented toward your community”, whereas 42.9 percent wanted “a sophisticated magazine reflects life in the big city”; and
- 49.9 percent would rather have a “magazine that serves you with lots of useful information”, as opposed to 44.1 percent who would rather “a magazine that entertains you with interesting articles and pictures”.

Respondents were also asked to choose from a list of potential content topics, and identify which ones they would be somewhat or very interested in seeing in a city magazine; the top five categories were local travel (85.8 percent “somewhat/very interested”), international travel (84.8 percent), entertainment reviews and listings (84.3 percent), restaurant reviews (83.1 percent) and articles on business and politics (79.5 percent). The survey also showed that “scenery” (22.7 percent) and “climate” (13.7 percent) were the top responses to the question, “What do you think is the best thing about living in Vancouver?”, running well ahead of “quality of life” (6.0 percent) and “variety of things to do” (2.5 percent).

The respondents were also asked to provide some information about themselves. Almost 88 percent told the interviewer that they had lived in the Vancouver area for over ten years, while just under half of respondents (47.9 percent) said that they had a household income over \$100,000. Most interesting, insofar as the demographic skew is concerned, is the age and sex of the respondents: 60 percent were female (compared to 46 percent female respondents in the PMB 2002 readership survey), while just shy of three

in five (58.4 percent) were identified as being 50 years of age or older (compared to 34 percent in PMB 2002). This is the caveat of telephone surveys: most respondents tend to be older and female, as they are the ones most likely to be home when the researcher makes the call. Caution must be taken when interpreting the results. That said, the survey results were tagged from the beginning to be a sales tool, not an editorial tool; as Jim Sutherland said at one staff meeting, when you relaunch, you have to be able to say that “we listened and we acted” and provide enough changes to justify a new sales pitch to advertisers. The market research would — if nothing else — fill that role. By mid-January, with the mock-up of the new magazine ready to be tested with focus groups, the survey results would be taken and transformed into promotional material for the sales force.

Part Four: Conclusions

As of late 2002, magazine publishers worldwide were still suffering through a sluggish advertising market, in part attributable to larger issues — uncertainty from the fallout of September 11, 2001’s terrorist attacks, and weak economies in the United States and Europe — but also resulting from the fact that, for many national and global advertisers, magazines are no longer the medium of choice; when such advertisers do choose to spend money, they first choose the medium with the widest reach (television) or the medium with the most immediate impact (newspapers). What role do magazines play in today’s media world? One answer to that question — posed by *Advertising Age* in an October 22, 2001 article — was provided by Mark Whitaker, editor of *Newsweek* magazine: “What’s at a premium today is reflection and the ability to stop and think. That’s what magazines do. In the media environment right now, they help people figure out what they think about things, and they do it with writing, they do it with analysis, they do it with pictures, they do it with stories”⁷¹.

For city magazines, the global village that electronic media have helped to build and foster has, paradoxically, made citizens more aware of, and interested in, their immediate communities. What is true of magazines in general — that they allow for considered reflection and analysis — is augmented by the desire of urban denizens for information specific to their hometown; the foremost function of city magazines — to “provide information about living in the city,” according to the Hynds survey — seems ideally suited to the tenor of these times. When John Macfarlane took over the reigns of *Toronto Life* again in 1992, he faced a publisher, in Michael de Pencier, who was skeptical about the future of city magazines as a species. Macfarlane responded as follows: “While continental forces threatened our national magazines, a city magazine

⁷¹ www.adage.com/news.cms?newsId=33180. Accessed May 31, 2002

was less vulnerable, especially one based in the country's richest and largest market. I told him that *Toronto Life* would grow stronger as time went on, because we were entering the age of the city-state."⁷² The subsequent decade at *Toronto Life* — full of business success and editorial acclaim — seems to have validated Macfarlane's theory about the city magazine's place in this new world order.

The potential for success should also exist in Vancouver: it, too, is a rich, large market, with a distinct identity within Canada and, indeed, the world. And for various stretches over the past thirty years, *Vancouver* magazine has been that successful city publication: vibrant, connected and, importantly, profitable. In recent years, though, the magazine has struggled to capture the imagination of Vancouverites, many of whom don't even know that they have a city magazine, and has even lost touch with its core readership. While retail advertisers are largely reliant on city magazines to maintain their visibility, and thus more likely to weather an inconsistent editorial product, national advertisers are less forgiving (hence the almost 37 percent decline in national advertising between 1998 and 2002 at *Vancouver* magazine). For all the many virtuous reasons for relaunching *Vancouver* magazine in April of 2003, it is the need to recapture national advertisers' patronage that reigns supreme.

If the motivation for relaunching is debatable ("devices to mask structural decay", in Malcolm Parry's words) and the outcome of this particular relaunch uncertain, there would seem to be value in the relaunch process itself. In July 2002, a disparate group of people got together — the publisher, editorial staff, art department staff, interns and advertising sales staff — to discuss a few very basic questions: what is a good city magazine, what is *Vancouver* magazine today, and what could *Vancouver* magazine become? This brainstorming session — and subsequent meetings — provided people at the magazine with an opportunity to reexamine the paradigm of their work and redefine, to some modest extent, the product they produce. It is rare, in most working lives, that

⁷² *Toronto Life*, October 2002, p. 17

employees are given such a chance; even in magazine publishing, where intellectual capital is the cornerstone of the business, most of that capital is spent on building to specification, following an established blueprint. Getting the chance to come up with a new blueprint, even one that borrows liberally from the old one, is an invigorating experience for most publishing professionals. Even for skeptical editors. As Matthew Mallon commented in early January of 2003⁷³:

If anything surprising and positive has happened during this relaunch process it's been the fact that everyone now seems to be behind the attempt to make a deeper, more content-driven magazine. The goals of publisher, editorial director and editor seem more aligned. Now it's time to see how realistic those goals are given budget constraints.

A good city magazine is organic in nature: alive, responsive to feedback and constantly changing. In the 1970s, *Vancouver* magazine reflected the sort of community activism of the day, a New Journalism style of reportage similar to *New York* magazine; by the 1980s, *Vancouver* magazine had transformed itself into a high-rolling, glamorous lifestyle magazine, reflecting the decadence of the decade and the big city sophistication that seemed to accompany Expo '86; through the 1990s, *Vancouver* magazine refined its focus, to become a more cosmopolitan city magazine, one that reflected a more diverse cultural mix and the rising importance of new industries (high-tech, filmmaking). At the turn of the century, *Vancouver* magazine tried to branch out and try new things editorially but soon started to wilt; the relaunch, in this parlance, is an exercise in repotting the plant and adding nutrients to the soil, with the hope of reconnecting the magazine with its roots. The challenge of the April 2003 relaunch of *Vancouver* magazine will be to preserve the essential qualities of the magazine, established over 35 years of publishing, and incorporate these qualities into a revamped product that is both relevant to its core audience and profitable to its publisher. The key indicator of a successful relaunch will be

⁷³ Email message, January 3, 2003

the return of advertisers, specifically national advertisers, and the impetus for their return will be a growth in readership. Readers look to a city magazine, such as *Vancouver*, for an intelligent, entertaining and provocative take on city living; the question, in 2003, is whether *Vancouver* magazine is ready to rise to that challenge.

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